NATURAL RESOURCES CONSERVATION SERVICE

CONSERVATION PRACTICE STANDARD

CONTOUR BUFFER STRIPS

(Ac.)

CODE 332

DEFINITION

Narrow strips of permanent, herbaceous vegetative cover established around the hill slope, and alternated down the slope with wider cropped strips that are farmed on the contour.

PURPOSE

This practice is applied to achieve one or more of the following:

- Reduce sheet and rill erosion.
- Reduce transport of sediment and other water-borne contaminants downslope
- Increase water infiltration

CONDITIONS WHERE PRACTICE APPLIES

This practice applies on all sloping cropland, including orchards, vineyards and nut crops.

Where the width of the buffer strips will be equal to or exceed the width of the adjoining crop strips, the practice Stripcropping (585) applies.

CRITERIA

General Criteria Applicable to All Purposes

Surface flow from contoured crop rows must be delivered to a stable outlet.

The width of the cropped strip shall be designed to accommodate some multiple of full equipment width.

No plants listed on the noxious weed list of Oklahoma will be established in a buffer strip cropping system.

Buffer strips shall not be used as travel lanes for livestock or equipment.

Buffer strips are not a part of the normal crop rotation, and shall remain in the location they were originally established until they need to be renovated or re-established.

All farming operations shall be on the contour or parallel to the buffer strips except on headlands or end rows with gradients less than the criteria set forth in this standard.

Row Grade. When the row grade of any crop strip reaches the maximum allowable design grade, a new baseline shall be established up or down slope from the last buffer strip and used for the layout of the next crop strip.

Arrangement of Strips. A crop strip shall occupy the area at the top of the hill, unless unusually complex topography requires vegetating this area in order to establish a farmable system.

When used in combination with terraces, diversions or water and sediment control basins, the layout of the buffer strips shall be coordinated with the grade and spacing of the terraces so that the buffer strip boundaries will parallel the terraces as closely as possible. The buffer strip may occupy the terrace or diversion berm, a channel leading to a water or sediment control basin, or lie immediately up slope of the terrace or diversion channel.

Vegetation. Buffer strips shall be established to permanent vegetation consisting of grasses, legumes or grass-legume mixtures.

Species established shall be adapted to the site, and tolerant of the anticipated depth of sediment deposition.

The buffer strips shall have at least 95% ground cover during periods when erosion is expected to occur on the cropped strips.

The stem density for grasses and grass-

legume mixtures shall be at least 50 stems per square foot, and for pure legume stands at least 30 stems per square foot.

The following species shall be used in contour buffers: *native mixtures, bermudagrass, tall fescue, tall wheatgrass, old world bluestem, big bluestem, sand bluestem, indiangrass, switchgrass, and alfalfa*

The Oklahoma NRCS Pasture and Hay Planting (512) and Range Planting (550) standards will be used as guidance for determining variety selection, adaptation, planting rates, planting dates, depths, fertility requirements, and planting methods.

Legumes may be planted with the above grass species following the guidance in the Oklahoma NRCS Pasture and Hay Planting (512) and Range Planting (550) standards.

Management of Vegetation: Vegetation in the buffer strips shall always remain functional with appropriate height and density to provide the protection for the intended purposed.

Fertilize and control weeds as needed to maintain stand density and cover.

Additional Criteria to Reduce Sheet and Rill Erosion

Minimum Row Grade. The cropped strips shall have sufficient row grade to ensure that runoff water does not pond and cause unacceptable crop damage.

Maximum Row Grade. The maximum row grade shall not exceed:

- one-half of the up-and-down hill slope percent used for conservation planning, or
- 2%,

whichever is less.

Up to 3% row grade is allowed for a maximum of 150 feet as crop rows approach a stable outlet.

When the row grade reaches the maximum allowable design grade, a new baseline shall be established up or down slope from the last contour line and used for layout of the next contour pattern.

Width of Buffer Strips. The minimum width shall be

- at least 15 feet wide for strips planted to grasses or grass-legume mixtures with at least 50% grass and
- At least 30 feet wide when legumes are used alone or legumes make up more than 50% of the stand.

Buffer strip widths shall be increased as needed to keep the width of the cropped strips uniform.

Cropped strips shall be of uniform width between buffer strips and shall not exceed 50% of the slope length (L), used for the erosion calculation.

Additional Criteria to Reduce the Transport of Sediment and Other Water-Borne Contaminants Downslope

Minimum Row Grade. The cropped strips shall have sufficient row grade to ensure that runoff water does not pond and cause unacceptable crop damage.

Maximum Row Grade. The maximum row grade within the crop strips shall not exceed

- one-half of the up-and-down-hill field slope used for conservation planning, or
- 2%,

whichever is less.

Up to 3% row grade is allowed for a maximum of 150 feet as crop rows approach a stable outlet.

Vegetation. Buffer strips designed for this purpose shall be established to permanent sod-forming vegetation with stiff, upright stems.

Width of Strips. Buffer strips for this purpose shall be at least 15 feet wide. The buffer strip widths shall be increased as needed to keep the width of the cropped strips uniform.

The maximum width of cropped strips shall be one-half of the field slope length or 150 feet, whichever is less.

Arrangement of Strips. In addition to the buffer strips established on the hillside, a buffer strip will be established at the bottom of the slope. This strip shall be two times the width of the narrowest buffer strip in the system.

Additional Criteria to Increase Water Infiltration

Row Grade. The grade along the upper edge of the buffer strip shall not exceed 0.2%

CONSIDERATIONS

General. Several factors influence the effectiveness of contour farming to reduce soil erosion. These factors include: 10-year, 24-hour rainfall in inches; ridge height; row grade; slope steepness; soil hydrologic group; cover and roughness; and slope length. Cover and roughness, row grade, and ridge height can be influenced by management and provide more or less benefit depending on design.

Contour farming is most effective on slopes between 2 and 10 percent. This practice will be less effective in achieving the stated purpose(s) on slopes exceeding 10 percent and in areas with 10-year, 24-hour rainfall of about 6.5 inches. The practice is not well suited to rolling topography having a high degree of slope irregularity because of the difficulty meeting row grade criteria.

This practice is most effective when the slope length on the cropped strips is between 100 and 400 feet long. On slopes longer than 400 feet, the volume and velocity of overland flow exceeds the capacity of the contour ridges to contain them. Increasing residue cover and roughness will change the vegetative cover-management conditions and decrease overland flow velocities, thus increasing the slope length at which this practice is effective. Increasing roughness alone is not sufficient to produce this effect.

Contour buffer strips are more difficult to establish on undulating to rolling topography because of the difficulty of maintaining parallel strip boundaries across the hill slope or staying within row grade limits.

Areas of existing or potential concentrated flow erosion should be protected by conservation practices such as grassed waterways, water and sediment control basins, or diversion terraces.

Where contour row curvature becomes too sharp to keep equipment aligned with rows during field operations, increasing the buffer strip width can help avoid sharp ridge points. In drainage ways, establishing grassed waterways at least up to the point of sharp curvature can allow the equipment to be lifted and/or turned to meet the same rows across the turn strip.

Prior to design and layout, remove any obstructions or make changes in field boundaries or shape, where feasible, to improve the effectiveness of the practice and the ease of performing farming operations.

Prior to layout, inspect the field's position on the landscape to find key points for starting layout or getting the width of one set of strips (one cultivated and one buffer) to pass by an obstruction or ridge saddle.

Whenever possible, run strip boundaries parallel with fence lines or other barriers.

Wildlife Food and Cover. The following management activities may be carried out to enhance wildlife benefits as long as they do not compromise the effectiveness of the buffer strips:

- Plant herbaceous species that provide habitat enhancement for the wildlife species of concern.
- Add native forbs to the seeding mixture to increase habitat diversity.
- Mow the buffer strips every other year or every third year depending upon geographical location. The standing cover provides early and late season nesting and escape cover for many species of wildlife displaced from adjacent disturbed areas.
- Delay mowing until after the nesting period of ground-nesting species, but mow early enough to allow for regrowth before the growing season ends.

PLANS AND SPECIFICATIONS

Specifications for installation, operation and maintenance of Contour Buffer Strips shall be prepared for each field according to the Criteria, Considerations and Operations and Maintenance described in this standard. The plans shall include, as a minimum,

- Percent land slope used for conservation planning;

- The minimum and maximum allowable row grades for the contour system;
- The designed width of the buffer strips
- The species to be established in the buffers strips
- A sketch map or photograph of the field showing:
    - ◊ the approximate location of the baselines used to establish the system;
    - ◊ the location of stable outlets for the system

This and other pertinent information shall be recorded on specification sheets, job sheets, in practice narratives in conservation plans, or other acceptable documentation.

OPERATION AND MAINTENANCE

Conduct all farming operations parallel to the strip boundaries except on headlands or end rows with gradients less than the criteria set forth in this standard.

Time mowing of buffer strips to maintain appropriate vegetative density and height for optimum trapping of sediment from the upslope cropped strip during the critical erosion period(s).

Fertilize buffer strips as needed to maintain stand density.

Mow sod turn strips and waterways at least once a year.

Spot seed or totally renovate buffer strip systems damaged by herbicide application after residual action of the herbicide is complete.

Redistribute sediment that accumulates along the upslope edge of the buffer strip/crop strip interface as needed. This sediment shall be spread evenly upslope over the cultivated strip when needed to maintain uniform sheet flow along the buffer/cropped strip boundary.

If sediment accumulates just below the upslope edge of the buffer strip to a depth of 6 inches or more, or stem density falls below specified amounts in the buffer strip, relocate the buffer/cropped strip interface location.

Cultivated strips and buffer strips shall be rotated so that a mature stand of protective cover is achieved in a newly established buffer strip immediately below or above the old buffer strip before removing the old buffer to plant an erosion-prone crop. Alternate repositioning of buffer strips to maintain their relative position on the hill slope.

Renovate vegetated headlands or end row area as needed to keep ground cover above 65%.

REFERENCES

Foster, G.R. Revised Universal Soil Loss Equation, Version 2 (RUSLE2) Science Documentation (In Draft). USDA-ARS, Washington, DC. 2005.

Renard, K.G., G.R. Foster, G.A. Weesies, D.K. McCool, and D.C. Yoder, coordinators. 1997. Predicting soil erosion by water: A guide to conservation planning with the Revised Universal Soil Loss Equation (RUSLE).U.S. Department of Agriculture, Agriculture Handbook 703.